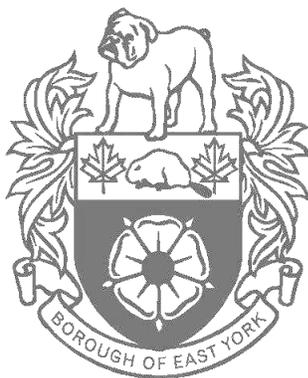


East York Tidbits

Stories About East York Presented by the East York Historical Society

East York in the Great Depression: The Activities of the East York Workers Association



Formed in June 1931 to address the economic and social hardships faced by East Yorkers during the great depression, by 1934 the East York Workers Association had over 1,600 members, with 400 to 500 people regularly attending their weekly meetings at local schools. As much as the Association drew strength in numbers to improve the living conditions of the unemployed, the Association offered a social release for members during a time when allocating money for entertainment was unthinkable for most families. The Association would hold dances and card nights for members, offering them the opportunity to socialise.

Many prominent Canadians spoke at their meetings, including Ontario Premier George Henry (1930-1934), who represented East York in the provincial legislature; J. S. Woodsworth, the first leader of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) formed in 1932 and Agnes Macphail, the first President of the Ontario CCF and the first woman elected to the House of Parliament in 1921 and who in 1943 represented East York in the provincial legislature.

One of the major struggles confronted by the Workers Association was to persuade East York Council to change relief payments from vouchers to cash. The Province pressured municipalities to issue vouchers for food and goods instead of providing relief recipients with cash. With vouchers, the Province believed that relief recipients would make better use of their assistance by obtaining basic food, clothing and shelter necessities and not frivolous items. The Workers Association favoured cash relief payments because it would provide recipients more choice to purchase goods from any retailer they sought fit. Relief vouchers were accepted by a handful of retailers and the relief recipients frequently complained that such retailers did not offer the best prices or quality products. In addition, the Association argued that cash relief was a more dignified method of purchasing products and paying in cash boosted the moral and self-worth of relief recipients.

In November 1935, after consulting with the Province, the Township Council agreed to change relief payments from vouchers to cash, but the cash payments were at a reduced rate, effectively reducing the amount of products a family could purchase. Upset with the Township's decision to reduce relief payments, the Workers Association called a strike of employable relief recipients. To receive relief, employable males were required to work

at the Township's parks. The work involved shovelling dirt from one end of a park and the next day shovelling the dirt back.

East York Council's response to the strike was to revert back to the voucher system for relief benefits. The Workers Association introduced another tactic to pressure the Township to revert back to cash relief. The Association asked its members to pull their children out of school in the Township. At that time the Province's education grants were based on the number of students attending school each day. With thousands of families pulling kids from school, the Township would receive less provincial money for education. On November 13, 1935 the Council reluctantly reinstated cash relief. However, before cash relief could be implemented, the bank stepped into the fray. The Bank of Nova Scotia refused to grant a loan to the Township without the province guaranteeing the loan payments. Without the guarantee the Township could not receive a loan, thus it did not have the money to provide cash relief. That spelled the end of cash relief.

Although the cash instead of voucher strike was a failure, the action of the Workers Association did draw enough sympathy for the unemployed to have the Association's President Arthur Williams elected reeve of the Township in December 1935.

Since Arthur was more than three months in arrears of his rent, the first task of the newly elected reeve was to defend his right to the office. A few months before the December 1935 municipal elections, in April 1935 the provincial government passed legislation prohibiting anyone from holding public office who was more than three months in arrears of their rent. Many of the Township's residents were enraged at the thought of holding another election for reeve. The issue was settled when another election was scheduled, but since no one but Williams declared their intent to run for reeve, a second election was not held and Williams was acclaimed reeve of the Township. It's not certain how the Province sidestepped its own law prohibiting Williams to hold public office.

Another activity of the Workers Association was to block bailiffs from evicting families from their homes. The blocking of evictions had the support of many residents and Township officials, no matter their political views. Even after Williams lost the reeve's office in the December 1936 election, the more conservative Township Council continued to support the blocking of evictions. Council passed a bylaw requiring bailiffs to be licensed to practice in the Township. The licensing fee was set at \$25 and each bailiff needed to post a \$1,000 bond. When bailiffs reluctantly filed applications for licenses, Council refused to issue licenses for two months, offering a reprieve to families threatened with eviction.

If a member of the Workers Association caught wind of an eviction about to take place, they would telephone other members and yell to their neighbours on the street "eviction." Members would race by foot or by automobile if one were available to the house where the eviction was to take place. As the bailiff would remove the family's furniture from the house, members of the Association would politely carry the furniture back into the house. This surreal scene would continue until finally the bailiff, being out numbered and out muscled would give up and leave without evicting the family.

On one occasion about 200 World War I veterans and their wives gathered at a house where a family was to be evicted. The veterans draped a union jack over the front door of the house and the woman sang God Save the King. What choice did the bailiff have but to leave without evicting the family.

In 1937 the provincially appointed administrator of the Township demanded that the Township reduce its relief rolls by 25%. This was shaping up as another fight for the Workers Association. However before the Township could address the province's demand, the end of the depression and economic hardship was in sight. By the end of 1937 the Township's relief rolls dropped nearly by half from 8,000 in December 1936 to 4,700 in December 1937.

With the end of the depression in sight, the need for the Workers Association dwindled. Its not certain if the Association dissolved or evolved into another organisation. What is known is that the Township's CCF club for a number of years after the Second World War was called the East York Workers CCF Club.

**Prepared by John Michailidis
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The East York Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and sharing information about East York's rich past. The Society meets 5 times a year usually on the last Tuesday in January, March, May, September and November.

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